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ABSTRACT

Research examining students' moral attitudes toward Watergate is described. Three hundred and seventy-eight junior high and high school students from both metropolitan public and private schools in a mid-Southern state participated in the survey. Students judged the degree of rightness and wrongness of six motivations for the break-in. The results indicate that all age groups strongly disapproved of the Watergate break-in, regardless of the hypothesized motivation. However, respondents were more willing to offer some approval of the break-in if the men were helping their country or showing loyalty to the President. The older students were consistently less approving under any condition than the younger group. Younger students had greater difficulty in deciding on the various dilemmas. Personal profit, personal power, winning the election, and Presidential approval were consistently rejected as justification for the break-in by all age groups. The higher the social class of the students, the more likely they were to disapprove under all conditions. (Author/DE)

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"MORAL REASONING: A VALUES PROCESS"

Adolescent Values and Watergate: Notes

A Paper Presented to

National Council for the Social Studies

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The Problem

The claim of the state upon the individual has been hotly debated since Plato and Aristotle first outlined their distinct positions on the matter. History is indeed full of the tensions generated by the struggle. In 1845, Thoreau, claiming the sacred absolutism of his conscience, refused to pay his poll tax due to his moral opposition to government acceptance of slavery. Later Joan Baez did fundamentally the same thing--only the war had changed. Others, however, have argued that such "moral absolutism" sows the seeds of the destruction of the liberal democratic state. John Bunzel put the issue squarely when he argued,

> The moralist has no commitment to democratic politics because he fails to distinguish between his own concept of morality and moral realism. Morality is regarded as truth, and truth, wrote Thoreau, "is always in harmony with itself, and is not concerned chiefly to reveal the justice that may consist with wrong-doing." . . .This is no practical morality because the contingency of politics is missing. Moral realism, on the other hand does not consist of a simple knowledge of good and bad, nor is it a faith unto itself that becomes a passion for certitude. In contrast to morality, moral realism is an awareness of the stubborn persistance of the complexities and ambiguities of the human condition and a knowledge of the anomalies of living the moral life.[1]

Citizens must constantly choose which moral pathway to follow. At minimum, we have to contend with traffic laws, tax laws, marriage laws, and, until recently, draft laws. In the preparation of a "rational citizenry" (competent to handle such

dilemmas), it seems essential that schools must consciously play their part in addressing such issues.[2] Indeed, "values" approaches to the studies of societies attempt to do just that. Although it is hoped such approaches will avoid the propagandizing pleas of earlier American civics texts, there seems to be an underlying assumption that the "values" orientation will lead to continual support of the American political system. This support, however, would come from a "social contract" evaluation of our politics rather than the simpler "law and order" acceptance of our politics, to use Kohlberg's terms. In other words, it may be possible to develop democratic consensus through values clarification education which assumes the significance of the "moral realist" school of thought.

Watergate has raised these issues far above the level of scholarly curiosity. In his remarks before the National Education Association in 1974, Henry Steele Commager stated:

> Watergate does not symbolize a breakdown of our constitutional system: It is not the Constitution that has failed us but those who persistently violate the document. It is not our political mechanisms which have failed us but those who repudiate traditional political mechanisms. The basic problem posed by Watergate and all its attendant horrors is neither constitutional nor political; it is moral. It is not a problem posed by an administration in Washington, it is one posted by the American people.[3]

As a small start in gathering information on responses to the claims of the nation reflected in the Watergate affair, we asked junior high and high school students to deal with the moral

dilemmas suggested by the act of breaking into the Democratic National Party offices in the Watergate complex. In particular, we were curious about student reactions to the general claims of moral "realism" reflected in James McCord's "I did it for my President," or John Mitchell's "I wanted to save the United States from George McGovern," or, Jeb Stuart Macgruder's "I was ordered to." The responses to these dilemmas, when added to other attributes of the students, such as knowledge of Watergate, patterns of keeping informed, age, social class and general political orientations, weave an interesting pattern. Neither Plato nor Aristotle would be totally satisfied, but the older, wealthier, more informed kids might just cause Thoreau to grin a bit.

Design and Procedure

The study is based upon the initial review of the data gained from a questionnaire survey of 378 adolescents in the metropolitan area of a large city in a middle-southern state. The survey was taken during the first week of December, 1973.

The sample was drawn from four public junior high schools, two public high schools, one public combined junior and high school and two private schools. Selection of the schools approximately reflected the student population of the area. Selection of students within schools was based upon social studies classes at the eighth and eleventh grade levels. The

use of grade for selection of general age accounts for the age distribution and should be noted throughout the study.

The survey instrument used in this study was developed in four stages. Open-ended questions probing broad reactions to the Watergate break-in were asked of randomly selected adolescents (N=43), during July, 1973. At this time there was much speculation in newspapers, news magazines, and on television news programs as to the possible motivations of those involved in the break-in. The interviews were taped and categorized and, together with the authors' personal speculations concerning motivation, a questionnaire was developed. In deciding upon which items to include on the questionnaire, the authors drew heavily on the pre-test responses to the general questions, "Under what circumstances might the Watergate break-in be justified?" and, "How has the Watergate break-in been justified as being 'right'?"

The questionnaire format was a series of six questions, each beginning, "Was the break-in right or wrong if . . . " The response to the question was to be placed on a continuum of five degrees with wrong on the left end of the continuum and right on the right end of the continuum. A separate response blank for, "I can't decide." was placed several spaces to the right of the continuum. Table 1 outlines the questions and the format. Our major responsibility was to see if different types of motivation influenced the adolescents' judgment of

the rightness or wrongness of the break-in. In a broader sense, the ultimate aim of the research was to link variations in the evaluative treatment of Watergate with an array of socializing institutions, information sources, and other possible influences acting upon the formation of adolescent valuing processes.

To capture the essence of these socializing factors, we broke down the moral dilemma responses of the students according to their age, social class, sex, patterns of information-gathering about Watergate (particularly school), and reported levels of political cynicism and efficacy.

Age

Previous studies of political learning have emphasized that as children enter adolescence, the capacities to deal with political matters increases both cognitively and evaluatively. Much discussion centers on the cause of this phenomenon: some attribute it to the child's own personality development with minimal emphasis on environment; others suggest age reflects the changing mileau in which a child operates. For our purposes, we use general age as a benchmark to compare with effects of of the other independent variables. If making moral judgments where motivation has been taken into consideration is a function of age, then the impacts of other variables such as school and social class become secondary.

Because we were looking at broad impacts of the independent variables, the sample was structured around eighth (N=184) and

eleventh (N=194) graders. Therefore, "grade," not age, will be used to identify the age variations.

Class

As a predictor of political learning, social class ranks second only to age.[4] As a reflection of social environment and particular packages of social values, some measures of class are crucial in any study of socialization. We chose an objective-class indicator, father's occupation, as the basis for the class variable. Reported occupations are the basis for a three-fold class division of the sample: Professionals (N=43); White Collar (N=166); Manual (N=131).

Sex

Recent findings indicate that the impact of sex upon political learning has become more confusing than the earlier reports of the traditional patterns of male and female political roles.[5] We introduced sex differences to further examine this trend (Males, N=163; Females, N=215).

Information Sources

The "standard" agents of political socialization are the family, school, peer (including neighborhood and friendship) groups, and media. We have attempted to measure the influence of some of these groups by asking the adolescent questions about these agents. We are aware that it is the interaction

among the group of agents that becomes the socializing factor, and that attempts to isolate agents have not previously shown significant impact.[6]

Efficacy and Cynicism

Two final items were included to provide some indication of the respondents' broad attachments to politics in relation to previous groups of adolescents studied in different times and environments. Although no claim is made that differences between our sample and others along these two dimensions can be attributed to some causal pressure of responses to Watergate, we do think it is important to note such shifts if they are evident. The efficacy scale employed was drawn from that developed by Easton and Dennis and generally taps the individual's sense of control over his political environment.[7] From the perspective of political socialization, decline in the sense of political efficacy raises questions regarding the health of the political regime. In a somewhat inverse way, cynicism also is related to alienation from the politics of the time. As Jennings described this measure, "political cynicism appears to be a manifestation of a deep-seated suspicion of others' motives and actions."[8] In employing these two measures, then, we were attempting to gain some insight into our sample's broad distributions along a positive/supportive, negative/alienated dimension of linkage with politics which is measured independently

of the morality issues.

Method of Analysis

The mean scores of the students on each of the six moral dilemma items is used as the unit of comparison in searching for any relationship with these independent variables. Use of the mean is first justified in view of the fact that development of cross-tabulations and hence, differences in percentages, would be affected by the small expected frequency of many cells when controlling for more than two variables. Second, the authors are probing for broad patterns in the data and therefore are not overly concerned with the development of measures of statistical significance. Finally, distribution of most of the response dimensions does not approach normalcy, and thus we must forgo any attempt to develop the standard difference-of-means test. The data therefore reflects variations in the measures of central tendency of the moral dilemma items according to the group of students defined by the independent variables. The "significance" of the variations should be determined by the reader through comparison with other shifts of the mean and not by the probability that the difference occurred by chance. This procedure was accomplished through application of the "BREAKDOWN" subroutine of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (Nie, Bent, & Hull 1970) which is specifically designed to carry out this kind of analysis.

Findings

The group of moral judgment questions consisted of six statements:

> Was the break-in right or wrong if the men thought this act showed their loyalty to the President? ("Pres. Power")
>
> Was the break-in right or wrong if the men expected to use the information to increase their personal power? ("Pers. Power")
>
> Was the Watergate break-in right or wrong if the men thought they were helping their country? ("Country")
>
> Was the break-in right or wrong if the men thought they were helping their political party to win the election? ("Party")
>
> Was the break-in right or wrong if the men expected to be well paid for it? ("Money")
>
> Was the break-in right or wrong if the President approved of it? ("Pres. Approv.")

As pointed out previously, respondents were asked to judge the degree of rightness or wrongness on a five point scale. A value of one represented "wrong," while a value of five represented "right."

All of the mean responses were at the "wrong" end of the scale, although some distinction between the items is present. The statements and their mean response are presented in Table 2. Although both groups feel the break-in was "wrong," the younger adolescents were more willing to judge in the "right" direction (see Table 3). When class is introduced, five statements re-

flect that younger adolescents of the manual class are less willing to judge absolute "wrong" (see Table 4).

Age is clearly the significant factor in determining positions on evaluations of the break-in. Although the class differences are in a consistent direction (upper are more consistently disapproving of the break-in), the differences are quite small.

Judgments were slightly influenced by the students' perception of how informed they were on three scales (Table 5). The older group influenced "Country" and "Pres. Power" by showing more favorable judgments at the "poorly informed level. There is a less favorable judgment at the "poorly informed" level in the younger group's response to the "Party" item. The differences are very slight.

The younger group who reported school as the most accurate source of information were less willing to judge absolute "wrong" (Table 6). They are also less willing to judge absolute "wrong" if the newspapers were their most accurate source, except for the "Pres. Appr." item. In most instances the older adolescents were so willing to judge absolute "wrong" that the source of information had little effect; the one exception is on the "Country" scale, where those who said the President's statements were their most accurate sources of information were less willing to judge absolute "wrong."

Finally, the frequency of Watergate discussion in school did not seem to show any effect on moral judgments (Table 7).

To summarize, the student who is young, of the manual class, and who said their most accurate source of information is the school, are less willing to judge absolute "wrong" under all the moral dilemmas presented him. It appears that with very few exceptions, older students were not influenced strongly by sense of being informed, sources of information, or frequency of discussion of Watergate in school.

At the beginning of the paper we noted that we were including sex differences as part of our independent variable structure. We introduced breakdowns by sex at all stages of the analysis and were unable to detect any consistent influence of sex upon results. We must accept the suggestions of a growing number of analysts that political learning in the adolescent years reflects the gradual shedding of any sex-biased roles and patterns of thought.

Table 8 presents the percentage of "Can't Decide" responses broken down by age on all the moral dilemma items. It is clear that the younger students had more difficulty in making judgments than their older peers. They had particular difficulty with the item dealing with "If the President approved . . ." ("Pres. Appr.").

A final point to be considered is the finding with regard to efficacy and cynicism. The older group reflected a slightly more efficacious orientation than the younger. The mean efficacy scores were 3.2 for the older, and 2.8 for the younger (possible range was 1 to 5). The mean cynicism score, however, was virtually the same for both groups. The judgments of the dilemma items were not affected by either the cynicism or the efficacy items beyond the relationship between efficacy and age.

Conclusions

The following conclusions emerge from our findings:

1) both age groups generally strongly disapproved of the Watergate break-in, regardless of the hypothesized motivation;

2) the respondents were more willing to offer some approval of the break-in if,
   a) "the men were helping their country"
   b) "the men were showing their loyalty to the President;"

3) the older group consistently was less approving under any condition than the younger group;

4) the higher the social class of the student, the more willing he or she was to disapprove under all conditions (very slight tendency, however);

5) school discussions, sense of being informed about Watergate, and reported source of accurate information about Watergate did not have significant impacts on the pattern of judgments found;

6) the younger respondents had greater difficulty in deciding on the dilemmas presented; and,

7) reported levels of cynicism and efficacy were independent of moral judgment items.

Most of the students, at both age levels, find it difficult to justify the break-in according to some claim made by the country. Their resolve was weakened when that claim was hypothesized as "helping the country" or "showing loyalty to the President." "Personal profit," "personal power," "winning the election," and "Presidential approval," all consistently failed to justify the break-in. An "absolute" commitment to the illegality of burglary is consistently present, especially among the older group. Since this commitment is related to age and class alone, we can only conclude that school influence is only reflected in grade level, not reported roles of the school in providing information about Watergate.

The judgments regarding hypothesized motives for the Watergate break-in appear to be consistent and based upon age and class. The claim of nation is truly limited, at least among the students studied. Regardless of the reported school role in providing information about Watergate, the claim of nation seems to be "rule of Law" rather than relative standards of approval. Whether a greater stress on "values education" would enhance this pattern remains an open question. The urgency of the question, however, seems lessened by our findings.

TABLE 1

Moral Dilemma Questions and Response Format

1. Was the break-in right or wrong if the men thought this act showed their loyalty to the President?

wrong 1 2 3 4 5 right ␣ can't decide

2. Was the break-in right or wrong if the men expected to use the information to increase their personal power?

wrong 1 2 3 4 5 right ␣ can't decide

3. Was the Watergate break-in right or wrong if the men thought they were helping their country?

wrong 1 2 3 4 5 right ␣ can't decide

4. Was the break-in right or wrong if the men thought they were helping their political party to win the election?

wrong 1 2 3 4 5 right ␣ can't decide

5. Was the Watergate break-in right or wrong if the men expected to be well-paid for it?

wrong 1 2 3 4 5 right ␣ can't decide

6. Was the break-in right or wrong if the President approved of it?

wrong 1 2 3 4 5 right ␣ can't decide

TABLE 2

Moral Dilemma Responses

(In percentage and mean score)

Item	Responses (%)							Mean Response
	wrong 1	2	3	4	5	right	can't decide	
"Pres. Power"	46	19	15	6	6		3	2.0
"Peri. Power"	73	8	5	4	2		4	1.4
"Country"	38	19	15	8	11		5	2.3
"Party"	63	11	10	4	5		5	1.6
"Money"	68	11	7	3	4		5	1.5
"Pres. Approv."	68	8	7	3	3		7	1.5

TABLE 3

Moral Dilemma Responses by Age Group

(Mean Scores)

Item	Response (mean)		
	Younger	Older	All
"Pres. Power"	2.32	1.66	2.0
"Pers Power"	1.65	1.16	1.4
"Country"	2.72	1.91	2.3
"Party"	1.96	1.30	1.6
"Money"	1.70	1.25	1.5
"Pres. Approv."	1.68	1.28	1.5
Avg.	2.00	1.42	1.7

(Younger= 8th grade; Older= 11th grade)

TABLE 4

Moral Dilemma Responses by Age Group by Class

Item	Response (mean)						
	Younger			Older			All
	Man.	Wh.Col.	Prof.	Man.	Wh.Col.	Prof.	
"Pres. Power"	2.5	2.1	2.1	1.6	1.7	1.6	2.0
"Pers. Power"	1.8	1.5	1.6	1.2	1.2	1.1	1.4
"Country"	3.0	2.5	2.7	2.0	2.0	1.6	2.3
"Party"	2.2	1.7	1.8	1.4	1.3	1.2	1.6
"Money"	2.0	1.5	1.3	1.2	1.3	1.2	1.5
"Pres. Appoint."	1.8	1.6	1.9	1.3	1.4	1.1	1.5
Avg.	2.2	1.8	1.9	1.5	1.5	1.3	1.7

(Class= respondent's report of head-of-family occup.)

TABLE 5

Moral Dilemma Responses by Age Group by Sense of Being Informed about Watergate

Item	Response (mean)						
	Younger			Older			All
	very	average	poorly	very	average	poorly	
"Pres. Power"	2.4	2.2	2.4	1.5	1.7	1.7	2.0
"Pers. Power"	1.7	1.3	1.5	1.1	1.2	1.2	1.4
"Country"	2.5	2.7	2.7	1.6	2.0	2.2	2.3
"Party"	2.1	2.0	1.9	1.3	1.3	1.3	1.6
"Money"	2.0	1.8	1.9	1.3	1.2	1.2	1.5
"Pres. Appoint"	1.6	1.9	1.5	1.2	1.3	1.4	1.5
Avg.	2.0	2.0	2.0	1.3	1.5	1.5	1.7

(Question: "How informed do you feel you are about Watergate?" "very informed"+"moderately informed"= very "average"= average "poorly informed"+"totally ignorant"= poorly)

TABLE 6

Moral Dilemma Responses by Age Group by Reported Accuracy of Sources of Information

Item	Response (mean)												All
	Younger						Older						
	School	Parent	Friend	TV	Paper	Pres.	School	Parent	Friend	TV	Paper	Pres.	
"Pres. Power"	2.9	2.7	1.6	2.2	2.8	2.3	1.6	1.6	1.0	1.6	1.8	2.0	2.0
"Pres. Power"	2.2	1.2	1.6	1.6	2.1	1.5	1.0	1.4	1.0	1.2	1.3	1.2	1.4
"Country"	3.1	2.4	2.9	2.5	2.8	3.8	2.4	2.1	2.0	1.8	1.9	3.7	2.3
"Party"	2.7	1.6	2.1	2.0	1.8	2.2	1.3	1.5	1.0	1.3	1.4	1.2	1.6
"Money"	2.1	1.2	1.9	1.9	1.8	1.1	1.3	1.4	1.0	1.2	1.3	1.0	1.5
"Pres. Approval"	2.0	1.9	1.6	1.7	1.3	1.3	1.4	1.4	1.0	1.2	1.5	1.2	1.5
Avg.	2.5	1.8	2.0	2.0	2.1	2.0	1.5	1.6	1.2	1.4	1.5	1.7	1.7

(Question: "Where do you feel you've received the most accurate information about Watergate?"
responses: School, Parents, Friends, TV, Newspapers, Presidential Statements.)

TABLE 7

Moral Dilemma Responses by Age Group by Reported Frequency of Watergate Discussion in School

Item	Response (mean)						
	Younger			Older			All
	often	sometimes	seldom	often	sometimes	seldom	
"Pres. Power"	2.5	2.2	2.3	1.5	1.8	1.7	2.0
"Pres. Power"	1.7	1.7	1.7	1.1	1.2	1.1	1.4
"Country"	2.8	2.6	2.7	1.9	2.0	2.0	2.3
"Party"	2.4	2.1	1.8	1.2	1.4	1.4	1.6
"Money"	2.0	1.8	1.7	1.1	1.4	1.3	1.5
"Pres. Approv."	1.9	1.5	1.8	1.2	1.3	1.3	1.5
Avg.	2.2	2.0	2.0	1.3	1.5	1.5	1.7

(Question: "How much was/is Watergate discussed in school?"
responses: "frequently"+"often" = often
"sometimes" = sometimes
"seldom" + "never" = seldom)

TABLE 8

"Can't Decide" Response as % of Total Responses

Item	Younger	Older	Total
"Pres. Power"	5	2	3
"Pers. Power"	6	2	4
"Country"	7	4	5
"Party"	7	3	5
"Money"	7	3	5
"Pres. Approv."	10	3	7

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